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# Societal Statement on the Role of Occupational Therapy with Survivors of Human Sex Trafficking in the United States

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# Societal Statement on the Role of Occupational Therapy with Survivors of Human Sex Trafficking in the United States

I As part of a specialized course, OTD 8340 Wellness and Health Promotion in Occupational Therapy, students from the Nova Southeastern University Entry Level Doctor of Occupational Therapy program, drafted a Societal Statement on the role of occupational therapy with survivors of human sex trafficking in the United States. The students explored the issue of domestic human sex trafficking from an occupational perspective, under the guidance of their professor, Mirtha Montejo Whaley, PhD, OTR/L. As of the publication of this journal, the document is under review by the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA)

Chelsea Bryant, Lillian Freeman, Meghan Granata, Annie He-Strocchio, Hillarie Hough, Shree Patel, Ashley Stedman, Stephanie Sylvia, and My-Lynn Tran

We are submitting this Societal Statement to AOTA, in hopes of promoting knowledge about this issue, and encouraging our association to support our role in the wellness and health promotion of individuals affected by human sex trafficking. Occupational therapy has much to contribute to the reintegration of survivors of, and prevention of human sex trafficking in collaboration with community groups and agencies. The first step is to raise awareness of this issue and to educate therapists as to our roles in assisting survivors of human trafficking to reclaim their lives, roles, and occupations.

## Definition

In 2004 human trafficking was defined as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons” (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2004, p. 42). Today, human trafficking is known as a “modern-day form of slavery,” through illegal for profit trade of people using force and manipulation (Department of Homeland Security, 2013). Human trafficking, in the form of sex slavery, requires individuals to perform sexual activities against their will while remaining in a life of physical or psychological captivity. These sexual activities include “pornography, stripping, escort services, and other sexual services” (Kotrla, 2010, p.182).

## Statistics

In the United States, the average age of children entering the sex trade by force or other means is between 12-14 years (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010). Ac-

ording to the Polaris Project website (2014), over the past six years, sex trafficking hotline calls have increased by 400 percent. It is estimated that 100,000 children are involved in the sex trade in the United States each year (Polaris Project, 2014). Statistics and findings from the literature indicate there is an upward trend in the number of children becoming involved in the sex trafficking industry.

## Risk Factors

Risk factors for children and youth falling victim to sex trafficking, include but are not limited to: running away from home; prior drug/substance abuse by individual or others in the home; prior multiform abuse (sexual, mental, emotional, and physical); low socioeconomic status; decreased level of education; neglect, and/or domestic violence in the home (Greenbaum, 2014; Hickie, Roe-Sepowitz, 2014; Todres & Clayton, 2014; Zimmerman et al., 2003).

## Sex Trafficking, Development, Occupational Deprivation, and Social Justice

Individuals who are sex trafficked are likely to experience a loss of the roles and occupations associated with their ages and typical developmental stages. According to Crepeau, Cohn, and Boyt-Schell (2009), occupational deprivation occurs when individuals are subjected to conditions “in which people’s needs for meaningful and health-promoting occupations go unmet or are systematically denied” (p.1162). Not only do victims of sex trafficking experience occupational deprivation, but over the months and years that they

are held captive, they are likely to miss out on important developmental and life milestones. Social injustices, such as sex trafficking, could alter a person's "occupational identity, disrupt or alter their performance patterns (roles, habits, rituals, and routines) and reduce performance capacity" (Martin, Smith, Rogers, Wallen, & Boisvert, 2011, pg. 156). These disruptions have the potential to affect the individual in varied contexts and environments, and over the lifespan.

### Implications for Occupational Therapy

The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process, 3rd edition (the Framework), emphasizes the importance of occupations in supporting "health, wellbeing and participation in life" (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2014, pg. S10). Participation in meaningful occupations helps provide a sense of belonging to individuals and assists in the development of their personal identity, self-efficacy, "roles, habits, and routines" (AOTA, 2014, S1). Braveman, Gupta & Padilla (2013) stated that occupational therapists have an innate duty to work with not only individuals, but society as a whole when individuals experience social and occupational injustices. In 1962 the World Federation of Occupational Therapy (WFOT) recognized sex trafficking as an area of need for occupational therapy research and intervention. Addressing this "innate duty" first begins with raising awareness on the issue of sex trafficking. We are calling on AOTA as our national organization to help support educational efforts to raise awareness of, and provide interventions for victims and survivors of sex trafficking.

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